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# Long Overdue

Why public libraries are finally eliminating the late-return fine.

BY RUTH GRAHAM FEB 06, 2017 • 10:11 AM



In 1906, a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* described a scene that had become all too common at the city's public libraries. A child hands an overdue book to a stern librarian perched behind a desk, and with a "sinister expression," the librarian demands payment of a late fine. In some cases, the child grumbles and pays the penny or two. But in others—often at the city's smaller, poorer library branches—the offender cannot pay, and his borrowing privileges are revoked. "Scarcely a day passes but it does not leave its record of tears and sighs and vain regrets in little hearts," the reporter lamented.

More than a century later, similar dramas are still enacted in libraries across the country every day. In some districts, up to 35 percent of patrons have had their borrowing privileges revoked because of unpaid fines. Only these days, it's librarians themselves who often lament what the Detroit reporter called "a tragedy enacted in this little court of equity." Now some libraries are deciding that the money isn't worth the hassle—not only that, but that fining patrons works against everything that public libraries ought to stand for.

Library fines in most places remain quaintly low, sometimes just 10 cents per day. But one user's nominal is another's exorbitant. If a child checks out 10 picture books, the kind of haul librarians love to encourage, and then his mother's work schedule prevents her from returning them for a week past the due date, that's \$7. For middle-class patrons, that may feel like a slap on the wrist, or even a feel-good donation. For low-income users, however, it can be a prohibitively expensive penalty. With unpredictable costs hovering over each checkout, too many families decide it's safer not to use the library at all. As one California mother told the *New York Times* last spring, "I try to explain to [my daughter], 'Don't take books out. It's so expensive.'"

The good news is that librarians are noticing. Since 2010, districts in northern Illinois, Massachusetts, California, and Ohio—to name a few—have eliminated some or all late fines. Others are dramatically lowering penalties for late returns; last year, San Jose, California, halved daily fines to 25 cents and slashed the maximum payment per item to \$5 from \$20. The American Library Association issued a policy brief on services for the poor in 2012 whose first point was a vow to promote the removal of fees and fines. Is this “the end of overdue fines?” wondered the Public Library Association as the trend continued to gather steam a few years later.

In Columbus, Ohio, the library board announced in December that it would eliminate overdue fines starting on Jan. 1. The move came when the board realized that fines not only weren’t encouraging the timely return of materials—the little existing research on the topic suggests that small fees do not affect overdue rates—but that fines were actively working against the library’s very reason for existence. “We’ve shut off access to the library when one of our staunchest principles is trying to provide the widest access to materials that we can,” the system’s CEO, Patrick Losinski, said. “We just felt fines ultimately were counter to the overall purpose and vision of our library.” Instead of issuing daily fines, the library now blocks borrowing privileges for anyone with material more than 21 days late and charges replacement fees after 35 days that are refunded if the item is returned. It already offers a separate kids’ card, which allows children to borrow up to three books at a time and doesn’t charge overdue fines.

Late fines and replacement fees can have a huge cost to the communities libraries are meant to serve. Low-income children are dramatically less likely to have access to books at home or to spend time reading with their parents. A study conducted in the 1990s found that the average child in Beverly Hills, California, had four times as many books at home as the average child in Compton, California, had in her classroom library. (The average Compton kid, meanwhile, had 2.7 books at home.) More recent research has identified many poor neighborhoods as “book deserts,” with dramatically fewer reading resources than wealthier areas. “We’re disproportionately affecting the people we’re most interested in getting to the library,” said Meg DePriest, the author of a 2016 white paper recommending that Colorado libraries eliminate fines on children’s materials, “the people who can’t afford to buy books themselves.”